

# First Defender on Battleship Row, 7 December 1941: The Attack on Pearl Harbor Envelopes Plains, Kansas-Native Leslie Vernon Short

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## A Young Kansan Enlists

After being accepted for enlistment in Garden City, Kansas, fifty miles northwest of his hometown, Leslie Vernon “Les” Short entered the U.S. Navy Recruiting Station in Kansas City, Missouri on 25 September 1940. The tall, well-built, blue-eyed, young man from the Meade County community of Plains, Kansas—about ten miles north of the border with Oklahoma—sat before Lt. Gus. Robert Berner, Jr., USN, and signed papers for a six-year enlistment. As with many young men in America, the military offered Les Short a way out of the Great Depression, from which many rural and small town families in mid-America had not yet emerged, struggling to keep their homes, livelihoods, and families intact.

With his signature affixed to the enlistment, Les packed his bags and was on his way to the Navy Training Center at Great Lakes, Illinois, emerging as an Apprentice Seaman (AS) on 12 November 1940. Following three days in transit time to the West Coast, AS Short joined the ship’s company of the battleship *Maryland* (BB-46) on 15 November. The succeeding year in service saw him advance to the rank of Sealc, and “striking” for a gunner’s mate petty officer rating.

Just as Les Short’s life had changed, during that same period of time, the *Maryland* underwent significant modifications as well, in preparation for a war with Japan that seemed increasingly likely with each passing month. During the summer of the 1941, workers at Pu-



Figure 1: CMN Leslie V. Short, Navy Mine Warfare School, Yorktown, Virginia, circa 1945. (Lemberger)

get Sound Navy Yard installed torpedo bulges to guard against underwater attacks. Workers also shipped on board four 1.1-inch quadruple heavy machine gun mounts to augment the existing battery of eight five-inch guns and eight .50 caliber machine guns. With her underwater protection and anti-aircraft battery strengthened, the *Maryland* sailed for Pearl Harbor, repainted in “war colors” for the first



Figure 2: The battleship *Maryland* sits in dry dock at Puget Sound Navy Yard on 2 July 1941. Note the massive torpedo bulge added to the ship's starboard side, both above and below the vessel's water line. Note also the 5-D Dark Gray paint on her hull above the waterline. The forward two turrets of her main battery have not yet been painted out n 5-D. (RG19, NARA II)

time, with 5-D Dark Gray on all vertical surfaces, and 5-L Light Gray on vertical surfaces above the line of the funnels—her final peacetime appearance. At some point prior to October, yard workers also modified her forward control top, moving two of her .50-caliber machine gun tubs elsewhere, and erecting a stump mast, platform, and supporting electronic cable for a large radar antenna, which at that point in time, was unavailable for installation.

Meanwhile, the Pacific Fleet continued to train for possible war with Japan, a conflict

that was closer than any of the battleship's crew realized. By October 1941, the Japanese Empire had determined to go to war with America. To ensure a free hand in the resource-rich region of present-day Indonesia, the Imperial Navy changed its strategic plans to include a swift strike against American naval and air forces based in Hawaii. Part of that objective was to immobilize the U.S Pacific Fleet for a period of six months, with a prime target being the American battleships at Pearl Harbor.



Figure 3: The battleship *Maryland* moored alongside 1010 Pier in the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard on 3 October 1941, sixty-five days prior to the Japanese attacks of 7 December. Note the sharp delineation between the dark gray paint on her hull and the light gray paint applied to her upperworks. (NARA II, 71-CA-173C-14688)



Figure 4: Pearl Harbor viewed from the north from an altitude of about 10,000 feet. Note Ford Island dominating the harbor at center, with the battleship moorings just to the left of the island. The landing mat of Hickam Field—Oahu's principle bomber base—lies at upper left. (NARA II, 80-G-182874)

### 7 December 1941: Attacks Open on “Battleship Row”

At 0600 hours on the morning of 7 December 1941, at a point 200 miles north of Oahu, six Japanese aircraft carriers launched a massive first strike of 183 aircraft, eighty-nine of which would target the American battleships. Forty-nine high-level bombers ascended to an attack altitude of 9,000 feet, with forty torpedo bombers gradually descending to almost water level—and all winding around the western shore of Oahu. The objective of about half of the torpedo bombers were the battleship fleet moorings north- and southeast of Ford Island in the center of Pearl Harbor. The delay in the deployment of twelve bombers from the aircraft carrier *Kaga* enabled twelve aircraft from the aircraft carrier *Akagi* to strike the first blows against the Pacific Fleet’s battleships.

Two parallel, six-plane columns of the torpedo bombers flew in a wide arc around Hickam Field—the American bomber base on Oahu—and emerged over the waters of the harbor at the head of the Southeast Loch, a feature that opened like bowling alley toward Battleship Row that lay along the southeast shore of Ford Island. Leading the parallel columns of torpedo bombers—skimming barely fifty feet over the water—squadron commander Lt. Comdr. Murata Shigeharu and Lt. (j.g.) Gotō Jinichi pressed forward toward Battleship Row at an angle slightly off perpendicular to their targets, closing to within 500 yards of the battleships *West Virginia* and *Oklahoma*, respectively. Being 200 yards forward, Murata reached his release point first and dropped his “gyorai” (literally, “thunder fish”), or torpedo, and pulled back on his control column just enough to clear the target.

Behind Murata and to the left, Lt. (j.g.) Gotō struggled to focus on his altitude, air-

speed, and on the *Oklahoma*, just outboard of the *Maryland*, which grew larger with each second. There was little time to think, as the run down the Southeast Loch was far shorter than the practice course back at Kagoshima in Japan. A whirlwind of thoughts and critical issues almost overwhelmed Gotō—spacing, intervals, attitude, altitude, speed, and, above all, the uncertainty as to his target. The situation developed so rapidly that there was no time to relay the customary commands, “Yoi... Te!” (Ready... Release!), to his observer, PO1c Miyajima Mutsuo.

At the last second, the frantic Gotō shouted “Hassha!” (Shoot!) into the voice tube only seconds after Lt. Comdr. Murata released. At about 500 yards range, Miyajima snapped back on his release lever in the center cockpit and—with sound of the supporting wire harness banging and fluttering against the underside of the aircraft before being reeled in—the torpedo fell away, causing the Nakajima Type 97 bomber to lurch upward, freed suddenly from its 800-kg encumbrance. Eager to accelerate away from the target, Gotō pushed his throttle forward and pulled back on the stick just enough for his aircraft to clear the *Oklahoma*’s dark gray form ahead, passing low over the battleship, lower even than the vessel’s twin, light gray control tops.

As each pilot had the discretion of how best to exit the target area, rather than turning north or south, Gotō sped straight over Ford Island on a course that took him over the seaplane tender *Curtiss* (AV-4) just south of Pearl City Peninsula. It was incredible how quickly the Americans had reacted, as a blizzard of tracers followed the Type 97 as it roared west. With the chaos and uncertainty of his immediate future enveloping him, for the first time during this, his first combat mission, Lt. (j.g.) Gotō Jinichi felt almost paralyzing fear.



Figure 5: Lt. Comdr. Murata Shigeharu, commander,  
*Akagi* torpedo bombing unit. (*Maru*)



Figure 6: Lt. (j.g.) Gotō Jinichi, section commander,  
*Akagi* torpedo bombing unit. (Gotō)



Figure 7: View of the American battleships under attack, seen looking east over Ford Island at center. Murata and Gotō scored the only simultaneous strikes (against the *West Virginia* and *Oklahoma*). With their airspeed and the running speed of the torpedoes taken into account, this photo might have been taken from Murata's plane. (Otawa)

### **Ships On Battleship Row Open Fire**

As the American gun crews awakened to the reality around them, Gotō's fears of anti-aircraft fire proved well founded. Among the very first Americans to respond was the *Maryland's* Sealc Leslie V. Short, the gunner's mate striker and Plains, Kansas native who, just minutes before, sat writing a letter and addressing Christmas cards at Group "A" Machine Gun Station forward of the *Maryland's* conning tower. Just as the ship's bugler sounded first call for morning colors, he noticed planes diving "from the sun towards Ford Island," thinking that U.S. Army aircraft were engaging the station in a mock attack. When word passed via the loudspeaker system for all hands to take cover, dutifully, Short made for the boat deck three decks below. About halfway down, he realized, suddenly, that real bombs being dropped by Japanese aircraft were blowing up the hangars at the station.

Although he had not been called to duty at the guns, hearing the din erupting at the foot of Ford Island, Short scampered back to the gun station, unlocked the ready ammunition locker, and commenced loading the portside Browning .50-caliber water-cooled machine gun atop the splinter-shielded platform. Despite Short's nearly six-foot, muscular, 180-pound frame, the task was no mean solo feat, considering the cumbersome seventy-five pound, 200-round ammunition cans. After heaving the containers chest-high in order to clear them from the ready ammunition box and load his weapon, Short opened fire on the first pair of aircraft (Murata and Gotō's) coming down Southeast Loch. Although Lt. (j.g.) Gotō's aircraft emerged unscathed, Lt. Comdr. Murata's plane took at least one hit.

Although Sealc Short could not have known at the time, his resourcefulness and energy had allowed him to lay down the first defensive fire from the battleships against the attacking Japanese bombers. His actions to defend the Pacific Fleet at its moorings in Pearl Harbor were but the prelude to the many thousands of sailors and Marines in and around the harbor who rushed forward to oppose their Japanese tormentors. It is estimated that the Fleet sent 221,368 rounds of .50-caliber machine gun fire skyward that morning, a figure including neither lighter machine guns, nor the heavier artillery caliber AA guns. Although the cumulative effect of that fire was far greater than the impromptu efforts of a single sailor forward of the *Maryland's* conning tower, Sealc Leslie Short could claim rightly that he was the first of the battleship sailors to act, to defend, and to draw blood.

Subsequently, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz commended Les Short for his resourcefulness:

For efficient action and unusual presence of mind during the attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, by Japanese forces on December 7, 1941, when, while in the vicinity of an anti-aircraft machine gun on board the U.S.S. MARYLAND, you observed the bombing of Ford Island before battle stations were manned and loaded the gun and opened fire on two approaching torpedo planes without waiting for orders.

Leslie Short made the U.S. Navy his career, and spent most of the next twenty years in the Navy's mine warfare force. Residing in Derby, Kansas at the time of his death, Short passed away on 18 November 1995, and was

interred in Greenwood Cemetery. He was typical of the men of the “greatest generation of Americans,” who, with both faults and virtues, stepped forward unhesitatingly to save America during the years of her greatest peril.

The memory of Les Short and people like him must be preserved with both reverence and gratitude if America is to move into the bright future that her founding fathers bequeathed to our people.



Figure 7: The battleship *Oklahoma* lies capsized alongside the *Maryland* during the later morning hours of 7 December 1941. The machine gun circled at far left is .50-caliber Browning manned by Sealc Short. Note the radar stump and platform erected on the ship's foretop. The machine gun position there was placed atop the boat crane, visible below and to the right. (NARA II, 80-G-19941)



Figure 8: Leslie Vernon Short, circa 1960, while serving as a technical advisor on the staff of Commander Mine Flotilla One. (NARA II, St. Louis)